

Woman, 97, back at home after Montgomery repairs storm-drain flooding damage

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A 97-year-old woman who was forced out of her house for more than three weeks after a blocked storm drain caused major flooding recently returned home after Montgomery County paid for repairs.

But uncertainty remains over whether the county or the state is responsible for maintaining the drain that caused the problem for Bernice Evans, who is known in her Silver Spring neighborhood as "Grandma Bee."

"She's smiling and looks like she used to look," said Susan Monaco, a spokeswoman for Evans and her family. "You can tell she is content to be back."

Evans, who has had difficulty speaking since her last stroke, vacated her Forest Glen home last month after violent storms on Aug. 12 left 3 1/2 feet of water in her basement. She returned home Sept. 8.

Monaco said Montgomery County officials met with Evans's granddaughter the day after a story appeared in The Washington Post detailing her ordeal.

Within 24 hours, contractors were working to restore Evans's home to normal, county officials said.

"They said that because it was condemned, they wanted to get it back up to code," Monaco said.

Mary Anderson, a Montgomery County spokeswoman, said the scope of the work included cleaning up the basement, disinfecting the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems, testing for mold and installing a French drain system and sump pump. Evans's furnace and water heater were also replaced.

"We just didn't want anyone to be out of their home any longer than they have to, especially someone of Ms. Evans's age," Anderson said.

Anderson said the county has estimated that it cost about \$30,000 to pay for Evans's temporary housing and to perform the work. The money, which was taken from an emergency services program the county runs, came from a federal block grant.

Although Evans's family is pleased that she is back home, they say no one has taken responsibility for the blocked storm drain or for the items Evans lost, including a washer and dryer, a dining room set and a stereo.

"What the family is most concerned about is that they are having to use her savings to replace essential items that were taken from her house," Monaco said.

After the flood, the family said that it was told by Montgomery workers that the State Highway Administration was responsible for the drain. The family filed a claim with Evans's homeowners insurance but said it was denied because the flooding was the result of a blocked drain.

This week, county officials said they have conducted an independent study and determined that it was "a state drain."

"Our feeling is it is a state responsibility, and we will be putting that in writing to the state," Anderson said.

Some drains along the road are maintained by the state, and some are handled by the county.

SHA spokesman Charlie Gischlar said the state has not finished its investigation.

"We have our right-of-way team, our legal team and hydraulics team looking into this," Gischlar said. "The research is not over with."

Until someone takes responsibility, Evans's family worries about what will happen the next time the area gets heavy rain.

"If someone doesn't clean [the drain] on a regular basis, what's going to happen six months from now or a year?" Monaco said. "That's definitely a concern."